

A fan product for

GURPS®

Fourth Edition

GURPS PLACES: TEA AND COFFEE SHOPS



by John Shimmin

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GURPS Places: Tea and Coffee Shops

A wildly unofficial fan supplement by John Shimmin

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Inspiration

Sherwin's Coffee Shack is based on a number of tiny coffee outlets, but notably one in Sheffield railway station in Yorkshire.

Introduction

The humble tea shop! A place of rest for weary feet, of warmth in inclement weather, of fragrant brews and delectable morsels. Every culture has its own incarnation, but the concept of a place to meet friends over a relaxing drink, without necessarily indulging in alcohol, is widespread.

This supplement is eventually intended to form a collection of cafes and suchlike for use in roleplaying. The brief is for relatively short, simple locations around that theme, following the concept of the **GURPS Locations** series. Each will have a map, description, default NPCs, suggestions for using it, and the all-important statistics for breaking into, fighting your way out of, or otherwise making a mess of the place.

The starting point is a single location: the smallest practical establishment that can be described as a coffee shop, serving hot drinks to passers-by from a one-man stall. Larger and more complex venues should follow in future. General information on the theme may be added as the supplement develops.

About the Author

John Shimmin has been engaged in in-depth practical research at the tea-shop coalface for several decades, despite a dearth of support from unappreciative government funding bodies. He acquired unspeakable taste in coffee at a late-night job transcribing telephone numbers into large print, with no sustenance but vending-machine instant with powdered milk. His preferred beverages are a strong Assam with milk, a mellow oolong, or cool chrysanthemum tea.

A traditional Englishman drinks tea to the point where his blood has long-since been replaced with an infusion of Ceylon, Assam, and Darjeeling.

—Fennel Hudson, *A Meaningful Life:*
Fennel's Journal No. 1

Cafes as a Location

A cafe's key value in games is that it attracts a wide variety of customers. People of all ages, backgrounds, and professions visit them, offering opportunities for interaction across social boundaries. They promise social contact for the lonely, and a chance to make new friends. They can be a lively environment to work on a novel or project without feeling isolated. Their melting-pot nature also provides an excuse for crossing paths without arousing suspicion. A spy can hand over stolen documents to a handler, or two lovers exchange a few words and fervent glances when social convention – or watchful relatives – would otherwise forbid meeting.

Historically, teashops and coffee houses were sites where artistic and political movements developed, and where their followers thrashed out arguments. This sometimes leads to an establishment being dominated by a particular faction, and hostile to opposing parties – or to any outsiders at all.

In the modern era, cafes and coffee shops are more inclusive than even the classic tavern. Minors, teetotalers, on-duty workers and those whose religion forbids alcohol can gather here when a bar is off-limits.

Sherwin's Coffee Shack

Snack huts and coffee cabins crop up like mushrooms wherever crowds are to be found. Sherwin's Coffee Shack inside the railway station is just such an establishment: a hut barely large enough for its occupant, crammed to the gills with the bare minimum needed to keep the business running. Despite its size, it's a lifesaver for early commuters and late-night travelers, and a useful landmark for everything from awkward blind dates to surreptitious handovers. The aroma of coffee lingers in the air long after the Shack has closed.

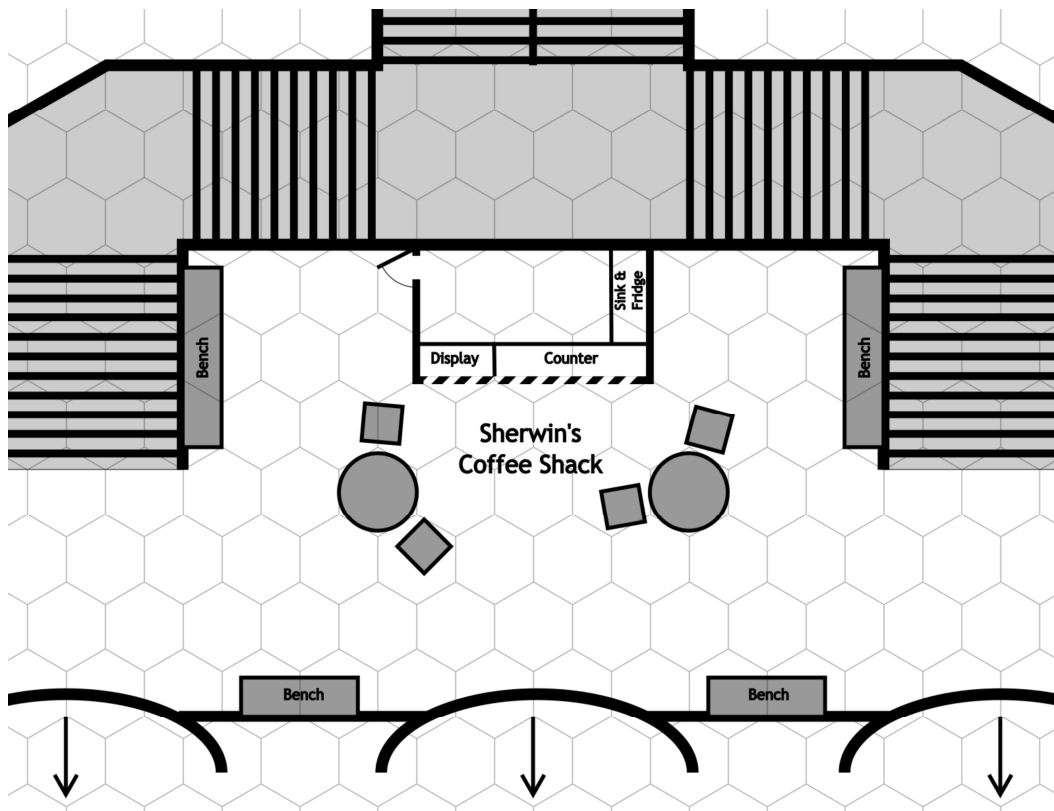
Site and Structure

Old photos show the Shack in its current place by the mid-1950s, but it's thought to have been around for more than a century. The structure has been altered and outright replaced many times, but the essence of the Shack remains. It measures barely four yards wide by two deep, with sturdy wooden walls (DR 1*, HP 23, combustible) on a hollow steel frame. The counter stretches the width of the front wall. The Shack nestles into the gap between two staircases, facing the concourse and station entrance, but largely obscured by pillars. As a result, it's easy for hasty passengers to overlook. The effect is a strangely secluded feel for such a busy location.

The entrance (DR 2, HP 29, combustible) is secured with a basic combination lock (+2 to Lockpicking or Forced Entry). Padlocks (+0 to Lockpicking; DR 11, HP 4) secure both the shutter and door when the Shack is locked up. An overhead steel shutter (DR 7, HP 30) that pulls down for the few hours the cabin is ever closed. When Sherwin takes a comfort break, a cheery "Back in a moment!" sign hangs from the shutter – he rarely bothers to fully lock up if any regulars are around.

Seating is provided by two small folding tables and four folding chairs. Any surplus customers rely on the station benches (sufficient for 12 nearby) or simply lean against the wall.

The Shack is plugged into the station's power and water directly underneath. A small radio quietly plays the local news-and-tunes channel.



Around the Shack

Large archways lead into the station concourse, with information counters, ticket machines, and the exits. Passengers can circle around the stairs to reach the first platform. Behind the Shack, the stairways lead up to the bridge for access to other platforms.

This liminal space, between the concourse and bridge, holds whatever the GM wishes. A lift to the bridge is likely, and other concessions (fast food, convenience store, newsagent or tobacconist) may cluster around the walls. Timetables and adverts might fill the walls, but so might weird graffiti, or murals in praise of the People's Noble Spirit. Maintenance and cleaning gear may be kept behind anonymous doors.

The Shack itself isn't large enough to store long-term supplies. Sherwin rents a disused storage space in a siding, five minutes' walk away. Its heavy wooden door (DR 3, HP 33, combustible) is covered by a steel-barred outer gate (DR 11, HP 22 *per bar*) and has a large, antiquated lock (+3 bonus to Lockpicking). Inside are 3d boxes of foil-wrapped filters, stirrers, serviettes, coffee beans, and teabags. A toolbox contains everything necessary to maintain the equipment in the Shack, and to make basic repairs to the structure. Small half-used tins of paint on a shelf are used for occasional touch-ups. Perishables are kept inside the Shack and brought in daily.

Sherwin is treated as an honorary member of railway staff, with access to the customer washrooms when they're open and the staff areas at other times. Customers likewise rely on the station facilities.

Equipment

Catering equipment consists of a coffee machine (100 lbs., DR 3, HP 18, electrical), fridge (45 lbs., DR 3, HP 14, electrical), handheld milk frother (0.5 lb., DR 1, HP 3, electrical), and toaster oven (140 lbs., DR 3, HP 20, electrical). The frother can be used as a fist load (p. B182); the frothing end is distracting but harmless.

Snacks are in a display case on the counter; it only holds a few, and Sherwin replaces them as necessary when time allows. There's a small sink for washing hands and cleaning utensils as necessary. A bar of soap sits by the tap. Rubber gloves, scrubbing sponges, drying cloths, and washing-up liquid are kept underneath.

Hundreds of disposable paper cups, serviettes, paper bags, and wooden stirrers are organised on shelves for easy retrieval by touch alone. Teabags are kept on a shelf above the window, where Sherwin can clearly distinguish

them. Coffee bean refills are stored at the back. Milks are kept in the fridge.

Ambience

Sheltered by pillars and the outstretched arms of the double staircase, the Shack is a tiny circle of relative calm amid the station's bustle. Footsteps pound and echo on the stairs and clatter on the tiled concourse floor; voices call out to straggling relatives, competing with the frequent booming of the PA system as it announces platform alterations or pending departures. Sherwin's little radio can't overpower them, but a few seconds in its soothing radius allows battered ears to tune out the clamour and focus on its jaunty voice.

While open arches allow cold winds to blow in from the platform, they eddy around the stairs, trapping the Shack's atmosphere in a warmer, coffee-scented pocket that never seems to dissipate.

Even when the trains stop, the Shack is often open late into the small hours. Cleaners and security staff chat with Sherwin and pause for a jolt of caffeine to keep them going. A few shift workers know to slip through a side door to access the Shack. At these times, it's a little beacon of light in the otherwise-unlit station concourse.

Until the early 21st century, a cloud of tobacco smoke probably surrounds the Shack, competing with the scent of coffee. In some countries, this is still the case. Away from our Earth, less familiar drugs might take their place: herbal pipeweed or sticks of Aceway Inc.'s Rush™ ("Now 40% Less Neurotoxic!").

Regulars at the Shack

Sherwin Chan is a friendly fellow in his mid-30s with a winning smile. He took over the Shack from his uncle, who got it from *his* grandfather, and still occasionally fills in when the current Sherwin is away. Whether any of them is officially named Sherwin remains a mystery that nobody cares to explore. At any rate, whoever is on duty wears the "Hi I'm SHERWIN" badge and duly answers to that name. Whatever the weather, the coffee and tea are perfectly hot, and the snacks suitably chilled.

Sherwin Chan: Area Knowledge-14; Professional Skill (Barista)-14; Contact Group (Railway; 12; Usually Reliable); Good With Customers; Intuitive Repairman (Sherwin's Coffee Machine); Just The Usual, Ma'am?

Daily Regulars

Dozens of people pick up a daily coffee from Sherwin, and many are amenable to conversation. Finding someone with specific, relevant information is a tougher task. The following examples may be useful to an adventure.

Laurie Brask: Haggard, underpaid lawyer, 40s, always on the go. Takes a range of cases, mostly immigration or civil rights, often pro bono. Stern exterior with a (relatively) soft heart. Shares a few tidbits of legal news and the outcome of cases with Sherwin, and whichever friendly regulars are around. Strongly dislikes Sergeant Nowak, both professionally and personally.

Dan Cavendish: Railway staffer. Mid-40s, bald, bearded, sarcastic. Gym rat, which compensates for his love of sweet coffees and treats. Knows all the train staff and many regular commuters. Excellent knowledge of day-to-day railway work, what can go wrong, and how to deal with it.

Ghalib Kale: Snappily-dressed businessman, 50s, brisk, efficient. Drinks one white filter coffee for eight minutes at 7.42 a.m. Never loses track of his briefcase. Knowledgeable about business and financial matters, and corporate shenanigans, if persuaded to talk.

Isla Marron: Railway staffer, mostly operations. 30s. Cheerful geek with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the railway network, its systems, and where all the crucial infrastructure resides. Strictly black, unsweetened coffee.

Sergeant Nowak: Local cop, late 30s, talkative and overconfident. Averagely competent, averagely corrupt. Eyes strangers with undisguised interest; overly familiar with Sherwin and most regulars; treats Laurie Brask with mild contempt. Liable to regale Sherwin (and anyone within earshot) with the last shift's inconveniences and victories, often at great length. Occasionally harasses the Study Group (but considers it "doing these kids some good").

Kelly Ziegler: Administrator for the local government, 50s, world-weary, cynical. Knows all the bigwigs and has access to most of their files. Complains in carefully nonspecific terms about her job while she waits. Often chats with Eddie.

Hangers-About

Not everyone pays a flying visit to the Shack. Some commuters loiter after a busy day at work, and nearby residents treat it as a convenient cafe.

Eddie: Late 50s, if not older. Doesn't seem to have anywhere to be. Lingers by the counter, chatting idly with Sherwin, and often visits several times a day, apparently

at random. Easy to talk to, but hard to get anything relevant out of.

The Chess Club: A small group of locals tend to gather in the afternoon, playing chess or cards (as local regulations permit). They offer a wide variety of local news and information, particularly to a friendly visitor willing to sit down for a game. The grapevine can produce almost any local information, from police activities to the biography of a deceased UFO hunter, though it may take a few days to percolate through friends-of-friends.

The Study Group: Many students call at the Shack after classes at the nearby college (whatever type it may be). These five have a habit of sitting at the benches together, going over notes and assignments – and catching up on gossip – as they sip their drinks. Useful contacts for college news, or initial targets for an infiltration of the college (via compromised devices, bugging, etc.). Always short of cash.

Infrequent Fliers

These notable customers swing by from time to time, and are good sources of *some* kind of adventure.

Oskar Fernholm: The local police are well aware of Oskar's criminal affiliations, but have yet to make anything stick. He's ostensibly a respectable estate agent with an interest in vintage cars. He regularly swings by Sherwin's to purchase a large cappuccino and a raisin flapjack, but every once in a while he orders a green tea and a blueberry muffin. The police are convinced this is a signal, and have wracked their brains over it to no avail. Useful as an entry point to the local underworld, but extremely cagey about strangers.

Mrs J: A grumpy woman in her late 70s, Eveline Judd spends most of her time roaming the neighborhood for things to disapprove of. She's unfailingly polite to Sherwin, and always asks after his family, as well as a variety of other customers – many of them long deceased. Sherwin humors her to the best of his ability, inventing minor incidents to regale her with. A rich source of information about the area and its history.

Abdul Sidiqi: City maintenance shift worker, 40s. Cycles home past the station, and stops on bad days, usually well after midnight. This often means recounting some grim or peculiar occurrence to Sherwin. Shares gossip from the city's network of sewer workers, electricians, road crews, waste disposal, and other municipal workers.

Elaborations

The Coffee Shack has been in existence for at least a century, and might be the latest manifestation of something even older: a roadside stall, or a genuine shack where travelers could obtain refreshments. It could lie on a Food-aspected ley line (*GURPS Thaumatology*, p. 59) or the site of an old holy well. Did Sherwin really inherit the business, or is he the latest acolyte of whatever power is at work here?

The Shack's survival in an age of ruthless corporate coffee shops and personal coffee machines is impressive. That could be explained by a hidden purpose – as a front for organized crime, government monitoring, or superhero activities – that subsidize actual profits. Mrs Judd's conversations with Sherwin might be elaborate codes for a sinister conspiracy. The Chess Club might be mobsters waiting for instructions, or guards watching over something nearby.

For an all-night coffee stop, Sherwin needs either assistants or Doesn't Sleep. A caffeine-induced mutation or a coffee deity's blessing are equally good explanations – or perhaps he simply catches naps whenever the customers dry up, relying on Less Sleep.

Who is Sherwin?

By default, Sherwin is a hard-working small business owner with no remarkable features. That can hold true regardless of the campaign - but it needn't.

In a supernatural setting, Sherwin could be a medium passing on spiritual gossip to Mrs. Judd – perhaps without even realizing it. Or he might be a ghost himself, and the shack merely an ectoplasmic construct that draws in passers-by. If so, he's Zeroed with a No Signature modifier, reflecting the fact that the city council never notices the shack isn't meant to be there.

If he's a psi, his powers are low-level telepathy. Consider Emotion Sense, Telereceive (Shallow), and possibly a limited form of Aspect, all from *GURPS Psionic Powers* (pp. 58-61).

In a supers campaign, Sherwin can be a contact for heroes, or even a neutral source who everyone agrees to leave alone. He might be a retired super – perhaps one with heat or chemical powers, or enhanced tastebuds! Of course, a coffee shack can easily hide the entrance to an underground lair.

Getting weirder, is he a shapeshifting minor god of hospitality, a Spirit of Caffeine, an immortal, or a reincarnator without much personal ambition? Is the campaign world another reality's Coffee Shop AU?

Adaptations

The Shack is easily adapted as a travelling coffee cart or burger van. Add a generator round the back, and a reliable car to haul it. It can be found nestling between the off-ramps of major intersections, the junction of two buildings, or the lee of a tree-lined hill. The suggested patrons will need adapting. Natural locations call for hikers, beachgoers, lumberjacks, or national park staff. A roadside van implies truckers, tired commuters, and families pausing mid-trip.

If railways and commuting by train aren't widespread, move the Shack to a metro station, coach depot, or multistorey parking lot. The railway staff may be parking attendants, maintenance crews, or work for a nearby hotel. In an earlier era, it might sit between coaching inns on a major road. Ports are busy and crowded in any era; the regular commuters might be ferried across a river from home to workplace. This works equally well for history or historic fantasy, as well as the modern day.

Adapt the customers and menu for local cultural norms: Sherwin can serve mint tea or karkade, and the chess club might play dominoes or Go, knit scarves, or argue interpretations of Marx, Wittgenstein, or religious scripture as they pass a battered volume back and forth.

If the Shack is inside an airport, ship, or other restricted space, the chess club may be off-duty staff rather than local residents. The same game might run for days, with whoever is on break taking over the next move.

In a mall, teenagers hang around sipping juice and coffees as they share music and chat. They might join the oldsters for an occasional game of chess, or play whatever trading card game is current. It may be the meeting spot for a high school detective agency, or a band of teenage superheroes.

Mechanics

While GURPS strives for universality, baristas and tea sommeliers are rarely the focus of adventures and their attributes are only of occasional relevance. The following handful of traits are suggested for quickly and simply depicting NPC coffee shop staff, or adding flavor to player characters with such backgrounds.

Skills

It's convenient to have some way to measure a character's competence at even mundane jobs. The following Professional Skills can be used to quickly depict NPCs.

Professional Skill (Barista)

IQ/Average

Defaults: IQ-5 or any customer-facing hospitality skill-3.

This is the skill of serving non-alcoholic drinks and interacting appropriately with customers. A successful skill roll lets you prepare beverages and light refreshments, recall food safety regulations, and provide allergen and nutritional information. You can perform routine maintenance on workplace equipment. Customer service expectations range from casual banter to rigorously-drilled scripts and precise gestures. At higher levels, the skill includes handling routine customer issues and supervising staff. Pleasing presentation, from neatly-cut sandwiches to cappuccino art, is expected even from beginners; greater experience lends itself to elaborate arrangements and picture-perfect drinks at industrial speeds.

The scope of this skill varies considerably by culture and TL. Overlaps considerably with Professional Skills such as Bartender and Soda Jerk.

Perks

Just The Usual, Ma'am?

Whenever you personally take or serve a customer's order, you remember it perfectly, no matter how busy the restaurant or how many people are yelling for your attention. You recall every customer's appearance, seat, and what they ordered – and their name, if you heard it – for at least a month afterwards, and get +5 to IQ rolls after a longer period. You know every regular's typical order by heart. This is just a highly restricted version of Eidetic Memory.

New Phenomena

Beverages and Magic

Just as strong emotions can infuse a place with psychic resonance, preparation and use of tea and coffee (or any other foodstuff) over a lengthy period could imbue symbolic traits, whether through psychic residue or sympathetic magic.

Coffee traditionally imparts concepts of wakefulness and activity. Tea is associated with relaxation and rest. Both are linked to company and conversation, and often to warmth. A ritual path magician might use a coffee shop for a ritual that ensures a long vigil free from slumber, or a teashop to charm an acquaintance into oversharing.

In some campaign worlds, there might even be tea-shades or coffee-spirits that form from the essence of established cafes.